

## Appropriate museology in theory and practice

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Appropriate museology is an approach to museum development and training that adapts museum practices and strategies for cultural heritage preservation to local cultural contexts and socioeconomic conditions. It is a bottom-up, community-based approach that combines local knowledge and resources with those of professional museum work to better meet the needs and interests of a particular museum and its community. Appropriate museology advocates the exploration and use of indigenous museological traditions where suitable. Using the Museum Pusaka Nias in Genung Sitoli, North Sumatra, Indonesia, as a case study, this article examines the theoretical foundations and practical applications of appropriate museology. The aim is to stimulate critical thinking on the transfer and cross-cultural application of standard, professional museum models and methods.

**Keywords:** Indigenous museology; museums and community; museums and social responsibility; appropriate technology; international development; disaster relief and recovery; Indonesia

### Introduction

What follows is an argument for appropriate museology, which is defined as an effort to refashion professional museum practices and technologies to better fit local cultural contexts and socioeconomic conditions. This paper is based on research conducted on museum development and training in Indonesia for nearly 20 years, with a focus on how the principles and methods of appropriate museology are being applied at the Museum Pusaka Nias (Nias Heritage Museum), located in the town of Genung Sitoli on the island of Nias, North Sumatra, Indonesia.

I first visited the Museum Pusaka Nias in July 2002 as a consultant to the Ford Foundation in Jakarta, which had been funding projects at the museum for several years. My job was to evaluate the museum's progress and make recommendations to the staff for its future development. I returned to Nias in July 2003 with two students enrolled in the University of Denver's (DU) Department of Anthropology Museum Studies Program, which I direct. The purpose of our visit was to engage in a collaborative training exercise with museum staff, as part of the newly created University of Denver/Indonesia Exchange Program in Museum Training. The objectives of the program were to provide on-site training to local museums in Indonesia and give participants the opportunity to share knowledge and experiences

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in the spirit of cross-cultural exchange. A guiding principle of the program was that approaches to museum development and professional training should be made appropriate to local settings.

In this article, I describe the training exercise in Nias in July 2003, in addition to other components of the DU/Indonesia Exchange Program, as an example of appropriate museology in practice. My intention is to stimulate critical thinking on the transfer and cross-cultural application of standard, professional museum methods through a discussion of the theoretical foundations and practical applications of appropriate museology. I am especially concerned with the relevance of appropriate museology for museums with limited material resources and training opportunities for staff, in locales where both museum staff and the general public are largely unfamiliar with the museum. I also describe events that have occurred at the Museum Pusaka Nias since 2005 and that have had a dramatic effect on its operations, as well as on Nias in general. These events further underscore the value of appropriate museology.

### **At the center of disaster**

The island of Nias is situated approximately 100 miles off the northwest coast of Sumatra in the Indian Ocean. This is the region that drew international attention in late December 2004, when a tsunami devastated coastal communities throughout the area. Because Nias is located near the epicenter of the earthquake that caused the tsunami, the island received comparatively little damage and suffered fewer fatalities than other areas. However, on 28 March 2005, Nias was hit by an earthquake measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale. Earthquakes are not unfamiliar to the people of Nias, as the island sits in one of the most seismically active areas of the world. Due to regularly occurring earthquakes, Nias is nick-named the 'dancing island'.

The quake and its aftershocks killed nearly 1000 people and destroyed much of the island's infrastructure, including roads, bridges, government and commercial buildings, as well as some 50,000 homes. At the museum, 12 glass display cases were shattered and more than 110 artifacts were seriously damaged or destroyed. Three buildings used for storage and housing staff collapsed, and a 200-meter long wall surrounding the museum compound also came down (Hämmerle, personal communication, August 2007).

Since the earthquake, the museum has been rebuilding with financial assistance from a number of organizations, including the Cultural Emergency Response sector of the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development based in the Netherlands, and the Catholic Mission of Aachen, Germany and Capuchin Order, in addition to private donors. This aid is allowing the museum to rebuild and advance its efforts to safeguard Nias cultural heritage in both its tangible and intangible forms.

### **Museum development and training in Indonesia**

The University of Denver/Indonesia Exchange Program was an outgrowth of both my first visit to the Museum Pusaka Nias in 2002, and the research I have been conducting on museum development in Indonesia since 1989 (see Kreps 1994, 1997, 2002, 2003a). It grew out of a concern for what I saw as largely ineffective approaches to museum development and training. Up until 1998, museum

development in Indonesia had been carried out in a top-down fashion, meaning that it had been primarily the responsibility of government officials, elites, and international experts. The Directorate of Museums (*Direktorat Permuseuman*) was the primary government agency responsible for overseeing the development of museums, both public and private, from 1975 until 1999. It functioned under the auspices of the Department of Education and Culture, until it was dissolved and became part of the newly formed Directorate General for History and Archaeology in the Department of Culture and Tourism in 2001. The Directorate provided technical assistance to museums through training programs for museum staff, often in collaboration with museum professionals from Europe, the United States, Australia, and Japan. It also produced instructional handbooks on how to perform museum tasks based on internationally recognized, professional museum practices and standards, established by bodies such as the International Council of Museums of which the Directorate had been a member since 1970.

Despite these programmatic efforts and the many resources that have gone into museum development in Indonesia over the decades, for the most part, museum workers (especially those working in museums outside metropolitan areas) remain poorly trained, and collections poorly cared for and poorly managed. Multiple factors contribute to this situation, which is at least partly a consequence of the top-down, expert and outsider-driven approaches to museum development and training described above. It can also be seen as a result of the direct transfer of museum models, technologies, and practices developed in cultural and socioeconomic contexts dramatically different from those in which most Indonesian museums exist.

For instance, over the years, I have observed training programs run by national and international museum experts in various aspects of collections care and management, such as registration, documentation, and conservation. Although these workshops were intended to provide museum workers with the training that would help them better care for and preserve collections, this training generally did not match the trainees' level of preparation or the resources available at their museums. It is important to note that most Indonesian museum workers, either those working in government-funded or private museums, come to their positions with little or no professional museum training (see Kreps 1994). Hence, they acquire their training through their day-to-day work in a museum. Furthermore, Indonesian museums, like museums elsewhere, tend to be inadequately funded and operate with limited material resources. Regular access to professional quality museum materials and equipment is also a problem, especially for museums in remote areas.

This approach to training not only pays little attention to how standard, professional museum practices fit particular museum settings, it also does not allow much room for exploring how local people may have their own curatorial traditions. Such traditions deserve recognition and preservation in their own right, since they are part of people's tangible and intangible cultural heritage and contribute to world cultural diversity. As I have previously maintained (see Kreps 2003a), many societies have long had their own curatorial methods, as well as models of museums that can be drawn on and integrated into contemporary museum development and training.

Recognition and use of traditional curatorial methods should not compromise the integrity or value of standard, professional museum practices. Rather, traditional methods can be combined with professional practices to maximize choices on how to

better and most appropriately curate those cultural resources communities choose to pass on to future generations.

### **Appropriate museology**

Appropriate museology is an approach to museum development and training that adapts museum practices and strategies for cultural heritage preservation to local cultural contexts and socioeconomic conditions. Ideally, it is a bottom-up, community-based approach that combines local knowledge and resources with those of professional museum work to better meet the needs and interests of a particular museum and its community. Appropriate museology also suggests that indigenous museological traditions should be explored and integrated into museum operations where suitable. These may include indigenous models of museums, curatorial methods, and concepts of cultural heritage preservation. Indigenous models of museums may be found in vernacular architectural forms, structures or spaces for the collection, storage, display, and the protection of valued goods and materials. Curatorial methods may be seen as any activity, behavior, or body of practices and knowledge related to the care, use, treatment, interpretation, display, and conservation of cultural property. Concepts of heritage preservation can be interpreted as conceptual frameworks that support the transmission of culture through time.

Indigenous models of museums and curatorial methods may be easily recognized in some cultures – for example, in Pacific Islander meeting houses or New Guinea *haus tambaran* (see Mead 1983; Simpson 1996; Stanley 2007). In other cultures, it may be necessary to look for evidence of museological behavior lodged in larger cultural formations, such as in religious beliefs and practices; social organization and structure (especially kinship systems and ancestor worship); artistic traditions and aesthetic systems, and knowledge related to people's relationships and adaptations to their natural environment. Indigenous museological traditions are examples of both tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage that in themselves can be a means of preserving cultural heritage (see Kreps 2005).

The idea of appropriate museology is inspired by concepts and movements in the field of international development, specifically 'participatory' approaches to development and 'appropriate technology'. Both are commensurate with a larger movement to recognize the cultural dimensions of development, or rather, how cultural factors influence development projects and, in many cases, contribute to their success or failure (see Rao and Walton 2004; UNESCO 1995; World Bank 1996).

### ***Culture and development***

When development became a formal field of study and official government policy in post-colonial 'developing nations' in the 1950s, development was primarily defined in material and economic terms. Cultural variables and the human dimensions of development were largely left out of development equations. However, after several decades of development experiments, both theorists and practitioners began to realize that development could not be simply measured by, or reduced to, economic variables. Rather, development was a profoundly cultural matter since it affects

people's whole way of life. Because ignorance of cultural factors often led to the failure of development projects, culture increasingly came to be viewed as a driving force behind development. Today, it has become widely accepted in development circles that, in order for development efforts to be sustainable in the long run, they must take local people's values, traditions, knowledge, and resources into account.

One of the dominant features of early development models was the outright transfer of Western models of development to so-called developing areas, including the transfer of technology and scientific know-how. Along with this came the transfer of Western values and institutions. However, this style of development worked to undermine other cultures' technologies, knowledge systems, and institutions, as well as their values and sense of identity. More recent culture-based and culturally sensitive approaches to development acknowledge that external models, technologies, and experiences cannot be successfully integrated into another context through mere adoption or reproduction. Instead, they need to be reinterpreted or reinvented through the lens of each society's own cultural identity and value system (see UNESCO 1996).

### ***Participatory approaches and appropriate technology***

Participatory approaches to development emerged in the 1970s in response to the limitations posed by top-down, macro-level approaches which, in many cases, were recognized as ineffective and not in keeping with local needs and interests. Advocated by non-governmental and 'grassroots' organizations, the idea of participation was a bottom-up, people-centered approach that ideally involved the intended beneficiaries (or stakeholders) in all phases of a project, especially in the decision-making process. Evidence shows that when local people have greater say in, or control over, a project they have a greater stake in its outcome and sustainability. Participatory approaches are a means of empowering people to take control of their own course of development. Participation is also a way of making seemingly alien institutions, technologies or practices more compatible with local circumstances. It is based on democratic principles aimed at bridging the gaps between outside professionals and local community members, suggesting that the knowledge and skills of local people hold value along with that of experts.

Culture and community-based approaches to development often promote the use of appropriate technology', which is defined as:

any object, process, ideas or practices that enhances human fulfillment through satisfaction of human needs. A technology is deemed appropriate when it is compatible with local, cultural and economic conditions ... and utilizes locally available material and energy resources with tools and processes maintained and operationally controlled by the local population ... Technology is considered 'appropriate' to the extent that it is consistent with the cultural, social, economic, and political institutions of the society in which it is used. (Hazeltine 200, 3-4)

Appropriate technology may combine people's indigenous skills with modern knowledge to upgrade indigenous skills (Rahman 1993, 20). Central to the idea of appropriate technology is that 'technology must match both the user and the need in complexity and scale' (Hazeltine and Bull 1999, 3). Appropriate technology is by definition small-scale, and its use is intended to foster self-reliance and responsibility

because those directly involved control it. The founding of the appropriate technology movement is often attributed to the British economist, E.F. Schumacher, who was highly critical of orthodox, Western economic development models and thinking. Schumacher asserted that such models neglected the human impact of change and proposed more ‘humanistic’ change strategies (Ryan and Vivekananda 1993, 24). The idea and practice of appropriate technology also has its critics. Some describe it as sentimental, conservative, paternalistic, and a form of neo-colonialism. Further, appropriate technology denies poor people in developing countries access to modern technology and high quality products (Burkey 1993, 197).

Although participation and appropriate technology are strategies that have been created for use predominantly in rural development projects, such as in health care provisioning, education, agriculture, and natural resource management, they are also applicable to museum development and training initiatives. As I have learned in my work in Indonesia over the years, museums that do not actively recruit the participation of community members (apart from museum staff members) in the overall workings of the museum only fulfill their missions to a limited degree, and are unsustainable without outside assistance.

### *The new museology movement*

Appropriate museology is in keeping with several movements in museology that parallel those in international development. Of particular importance is the ‘new museology’ movement that began in the 1960s. According to proponents of the new museology, the old museology was too preoccupied with museum methods and techniques and did not address the social role of museums. The ‘new museum’ was to be people-centered, action-oriented, and devoted to social change and development. The movement was concerned, fundamentally, with the democratization of museums and museum practices. It stressed the importance of community participation in all aspects of museum operations. Similar to advocates of participatory approaches to development, new museologists sought to bring professionals (‘experts’) and community members together through collaborative work (see Davis 2005; MacDonald 2006; Stam 2005; Vergo 1989).

Rene Rivard (1984, 84), a noted new museologist, has promoted the idea of ‘people’s museography’, defined as ‘a body of techniques and practices applied by a population to the conservation and enhancement, in a museum or otherwise, of the collective heritage of the community or territory’. This approach places people and their relationship to objects in the forefront of curatorial work, and suggests that there is no single set of curatorial practices that is universally applicable or appropriate. Instead, curatorial work is constantly being redefined as part of ongoing social processes and interactions, and is relative to specific cultural contexts (see Kreps 2003b).

### *Intangible cultural heritage*

Appropriate museology’s emphasis on the importance of both tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage, such as indigenous museological traditions, is in step with recent developments in international cultural policy and action, such as the passage of the *UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible*

*cultural heritage* in 2003. The Convention recognizes the centrality of intangible cultural heritage to cultural continuity and identity, and the preservation of global cultural diversity. As inscribed in the Convention, Article 2, paragraph 1, intangible cultural heritage is ‘the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage’. The domains of intangible cultural heritage covered by the Convention include languages, oral literature, performing arts, particular bodies of knowledge, and narratives in all their diverse forms. The Convention calls for greater research on, and documentation of, intangible cultural heritage, which can be an important element of community-based, appropriate museology. Indeed, the Convention stresses how community members and the ‘culture bearers’ themselves should take the lead and be responsible for identifying and documenting intangible cultural heritage, as well as carrying out measures to protect it.

### **University of Denver/Indonesia exchange program in museum training**

The University of Denver/Indonesia Exchange Program in Museum Training had two components. The first, funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation, consisted of on-site training in Indonesia for DU and Indonesian participants. The second involved training in museum studies and anthropology at the University of Denver for Indonesian participants. One of the goals of the program was to give both DU and Indonesian participants the opportunity to experience museum work in cultural and national settings unlike their own. Another goal was to show participants and our sponsors that what may seem appropriate in one context may not be in another.

The DU participants in the program were Catherine Fitzgerald and Heather Ahlstrom Coldwell. Both were second-year graduate students in the DU Department of Anthropology Museum Studies Program, and had had at least one year of training in various aspects of museum work. In this article, I only describe our work at the Museum Pusaka Nias, although we also carried out a project at the Kobus Centre in Sintang, West Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). The Museum Pusaka Nias and the Kobus Centre were selected as participants in the exchange program based on my previous visits to each site in 2002.

The Indonesian participants who came to DU for training were Nata’alui Duha, Vice Director of the Museum Pusaka Nias, and Novia Sagita from the Kobus Centre in Sintang. Nata’alui Duha was in residence at DU from September to December 2004, and Novia Sagita was in residence for the entire 2004–05 academic year. Nata’alui Duha was familiar with museum work, since he had been working at the museum since 1995. He had also undertaken some formal museological training in Jakarta. Novia Sagita was a newcomer to the museum field, but had extensive experience working on community development projects and with the Kobus Centre’s women’s weaving cooperative. Their work at DU was supported by fellowships from the Asian Cultural Council in New York City.

At DU, Nata’alui Duha and Novia Sagita followed formal courses in museum studies and anthropology, while receiving hands-on training in the University of Denver Museum of Anthropology under the guidance of Ms Brooke Rohde, Curator of Collections, and myself. Their training and course of study were tailored to their particular needs and interests, in addition to those of their home institutions. In

keeping with the philosophy behind appropriate museology, we tried to ‘match both the user and the need in complexity and scale. (Hazeltine and Bull 1999, 3).

### **Appropriate museology at the Museum Pusaka Nias**

The Museum Pusaka Nias was founded by Father Johannes Hämmerle, a German Catholic missionary who has been working on the island for nearly 40 years. Since the 1970s, Father Hämmerle has been conducting research and publishing on the island’s history and culture, in addition to collecting examples of Nias material culture. In 1990, Father Hämmerle received permission from his order, Friars Minor Capuchin, to proceed with his plans to create a museum. The museum now functions under the auspices of a private foundation, Yayasan Pusaka Nias, and has been supported by private donations and grants from international governmental and non-governmental agencies and foundations. The mission of the museum is to foster awareness and appreciation of the island’s natural and cultural history; to serve as a study, research, and recreation center; to promote the education and socioeconomic development of local people, and to aid the regional government in tourism development (Figure 1).

Nias has long been known for its outstanding art and monumental architecture. According to Feldman (1994, 43), ‘the islanders produced some of the most spectacular examples of architecture, stone work, wooden sculpture, gold work and costumes seen anywhere in the [Indonesian] archipelago’ (see also Taylor and Aragon 1991; Volkenkundig Museum Nusantara, Delft 1990; Waterson 1990). Nias art and artifacts have been ardently collected since the 1800s and can now be found in museums and private collections throughout the world. The appetite for Nias



Figure 1. Museum Pusaka Nias staff. July 2003. Photograph by Heather Ahlstrom Coldwell.



material was so voracious that by the 1970s little was left on the island (see Feldman 1994). Father Hämmerle began his own collecting and created the Museum Pusaka Nias in an effort to preserve what remained.

When Ms. Fitzgerald, Ms Coldwell and I arrived in Genung Sitoli, our first task was to meet with museum staff members and discuss their needs and what they would like to accomplish during our visit. Based on our discussions, we collectively decided to concentrate on two main areas of concern: collection care and management, and exhibitions.

The museum's collection of some 6000 objects consists mostly of ethnographic materials, including baskets, textiles, jewelry, ritual and ceremonial regalia; weaponry, farming equipment, wooden and stone sculptures; pottery and ceramics. The museum also has a very impressive collection of finely crafted models of traditional houses representing vernacular architecture.

A small portion of the collection was on display, while the rest remained in storage in several rooms located in the various buildings on the museum grounds. None of the rooms or display areas had adequate means of climate control to counteract the damaging effects of exposure to high levels of light, heat and humidity. The storage rooms were cramped and had little shelving, so many objects were stored on the floor or piled one on top of the other. Since we were only going to be in Nias for 10 days, we did not have time to help rearrange the entire collection and upgrade all the storage facilities. Consequently, we decided to concentrate on the collections that had already been moved to one of the exhibit halls, which was in the process of being converted into a temporary storage room (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Storage unit in Museum Pusaka Nias. July 2003. Photograph by Heather Ahlstrom Coldwell.

The exhibit halls were completed the previous year and, although they were designed for exhibition purposes by a Swiss architect and mimicked elements of Nias vernacular architecture, they were not designed with the protection of collections in mind. Glass windows had been installed for security purposes and to protect the interior from strong sea winds. While necessary and attractive, the windows allowed excessive light to enter, which contributed to the generation of heat. Gaps between the walls and the ceiling provided much needed ventilation, but also easy access for birds, rodents, and other pests. With these conditions in mind, we decided to concentrate on instructing the staff in the basic principles of preventive conservation, and demonstrating how they could be applied to the storage and display of objects.

The museum does have a rudimentary conservation laboratory and a few staff members had some background knowledge of conservation. However, these staff members also told me that they did not feel they had had adequate training and knowledge to use the available chemicals and equipment appropriately. Thus, these resources were of little value to the staff.

I began our instruction with a lecture on preventive conservation principles and measures, and why these are important for the long-term safeguarding of collections. I explained that preventive conservation is intended to prevent the need for remedial conservation, understood as the process of halting the deterioration of an object and stabilizing its condition using specialist conservation techniques (Ambrose and Paine 2005, 190–1). Remedial conservation had been the focus of previous conservation training at the museum. While extremely valuable and necessary under certain conditions, remedial conservation can be a highly technical and costly undertaking that requires the skills of professionally trained conservators, as well as expensive materials and equipment. In contrast, I emphasized that preventive conservation is largely a matter of becoming familiar with the basic techniques of object handling, reducing various types of stress placed on objects, and ameliorating deleterious environmental conditions, all of which do not necessarily require highly professional, technical skills or expensive equipment.

Following the lecture, we toured storage units and exhibits with the staff to identify problem areas. Our next step was to go to the local market to purchase supplies for a hands-on demonstration of how to apply the principles and methods of preventive conservation. At the market we purchased:

- Nylon fishing line to replace the metal wire the staff was using to hang objects in exhibits
- Mosquito netting to cover shelving units and protect objects from bird and rodent droppings, dust, and other debris
- Linoleum to cover wooden shelves so they could be cleaned more easily
- Cotton cloth and batting to make object forms and mounts
- Plastic tubing for object rests to decrease abrasion on surfaces
- Velcro to attach materials to one another and to avoid the use of glue and nails
- Cotton swabs and soft bristled paint brushes to safely clean objects

We obtained cardboard tubes (used for rolling linoleum flooring) and Styrofoam packing (in which electronics had been shipped) from shopkeepers at no cost. The total cost of materials purchased was approximately US\$30.

Back at the museum, the students and I instructed the staff in how to properly clean and handle objects using cotton swabs, soft bristle brushes, and a handheld vacuum cleaner we had purchased in Jakarta for about US\$25. We paid for the vacuum cleaner out the project budget, but it was an expense that would not have been prohibitive for the museum. We also showed staff members how to construct mounts out of Styrofoam and cotton forms, and how to roll textiles on the cardboard tubes to avoid creasing. Ideally, these materials should have been tested for their potential deleterious, long-term effects on objects. However, in the absence of archival quality materials, they were handy and inexpensive substitutes. Nata'alui Duha told me a year later they had substituted the cardboard tubes with bamboo, which is a material in abundance on the island. We then helped the staff cover wooden shelves with linoleum and to arrange objects in both accessible and secure positions.

The exercise was both instructive and empowering for museum staff members, because it showed them that they were capable of doing the work themselves, and that the materials and equipment they needed for preventive conservation were relatively inexpensive (or free) and readily available. The success of the exercise was clearly evident when the students and I returned from a three day trip to another part of the island. While we were away, the staff refurbished an entire shelving unit complete with skillfully crafted mounts for all the objects and mosquito netting to protect objects from dust and falling debris. They had also covered the window behind the unit to reduce light exposure and heat. One staff member in charge of collections told me that, as a result of this exercise, she now felt more confident in her job (Figure 3).

During our stay, we also discussed different approaches to exhibition design and object display, including some of the ways in which the staff might incorporate local



Figure 3. Refurbished storage unit. July 2003. Photograph by Heather Ahlstrom.

and traditional approaches. At the time, the museum was using display methods typical of Western-style ethnographic museums. Objects were arranged typologically or thematically in glass display cases, or on open platforms, to represent various aspects of Nias traditional culture, such as pre-Christian and pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices; the means of making a living; rituals and ceremonies related to the cycles of life, warfare, and personal adornment.

In addition to displaying and preserving its notable collection of the island's tangible cultural heritage, the museum also offered workshops on traditional arts such as carving, dance, and music, in an effort to revitalize and preserve them. The museum housed the only library on the island, which contained books, video recordings, magazines and other materials on a wide range of topics. As part of the museum's stated mission, it also sponsored a number of activities intended to promote the island's socioeconomic development. For example, the museum sponsored training programs for local students in business administration, English, and tourism development. It also regularly published a newsletter that contained useful information on topics like health care and hygiene, agricultural practices, environmental conservation, and so on. This newsletter was distributed throughout the island.

The Museum Pusaka Nias had relied almost exclusively on outside financial and technical support, as well as on the efforts of Father Hämmerle and his dedicated staff, for its existence. One of the main challenges to the staff at the time of our visit was how to generate greater community participation in, and support for, the museum. Staff members told me that many community members viewed the museum primarily as a recreational outlet and tourist attraction, rather than as an educational resource. Museum grounds were crowded on Sundays with people who came to see the live animals on display, and to relax in its park like atmosphere next to the sea. Father Hämmerle had intentionally created this kind of atmosphere in an attempt to popularize the museum and make it attractive to local people. He hoped that visitors would develop a deeper appreciation of the island's natural and cultural history in the process of enjoying themselves. Nata'alui Duha was keenly aware of the ramifications that limited community participation had for the long-term survival of the museum, and its effectiveness in carrying out its mission. Therefore, he devoted some of his time at DU to researching community participation in museums and museum-community relations.

The problem of limited community participation, or even interest in museums, is not unique to the Museum Pusaka Nias, but is a perennial problem for museums throughout Indonesia. When I first went to Indonesia in 1989 to begin my study of museum development, staff members of the Directorate of Museums in Jakarta informed me that Indonesians were '*belum* (not yet) museum minded'. They attributed this lack of museum-mindedness to Indonesia's status as a 'developing' and 'modernizing' nation, and the public's ignorance of the museum and its purposes. Hence, it was their job to educate the populace, including museum workers, about the museum and its purposes.

While much has changed in Indonesia, and within the Indonesian museum profession since 1989, museums still tend to not be well integrated into local communities or of much interest to their members. Commenting on the status of museums in Indonesian society in 2005, former Director-General of Culture, Edi Sedyawati, states:

We have a long way to go to overcome community prejudice regarding the value of museums . . . Traditionally, museums have not played a major role in Indonesian society and have not been seen as a major national resource. The community has a very low level of expectations regarding the potential of museums to entertain or to educate. We must work to change community perceptions of what a museum is. (Sedyawati 2003, 2)

In many cases, community members view the museum as a foreign institution created by outside interests for the benefit of tourists, visiting dignitaries, government officials, and researchers. Regular attendance on the part of local people is relatively low, aside from students on obligatory school visits.

This pattern may be seen as yet another consequence of top-down, expert, and outsider-driven approaches to museum development. As I discovered in my research in Indonesia over the years, when museum models are imposed from above and from outside the community, local people do not feel a sense of ownership in museums or see the relevance of the institution to their own lives. Appropriate museology, with its emphasis on bottom-up and participatory approaches to museum development, as well as indigenous museology, can be a means of generating greater interest and engagement in museums on the part of community members.

### **A blessing in disguise?**

A report posted on the Museum Pusaka Nias website by Fabius Ndruru lists activities that have taken place since 28 March 2005 (the date of the earthquake) through December 2006 (Ndruru 2007). In addition to on-site activities related to repairing damaged buildings, rehousing collections, and reinvigorating its educational programming, the museum's staff has been working in village communities across the island to help reconstruct traditional houses, *Omo Hada*, damaged by the earthquake. According to Father Hämmerle, a local government official requested the museum's assistance in this effort, which was supported with aid from a number of outside sources such as the United States Embassy in Jakarta, the Johanniter e.v. Berlin, and the city governments of Münster and Konstanz, Germany (personal communication, August 2007).

As noted earlier, Nias is well-known for its extraordinary traditional architecture and megalithic monuments, which have been the subject of much scholarly attention and one of the island's main tourist attractions. *Omo Hada* are quintessential features of Nias traditional culture since they are linked to nearly every aspect of traditional life, including social organization and political structure, art and aesthetics, religious beliefs and values, and technology. In former times, and today to a certain degree, a man's social standing and success were measured by his ability to construct a fine house and give great feasts. The larger, more elaborate houses were built by chiefs and noblemen, and megaliths erected in front of a house during feasts symbolized the owner's wealth and status. Customary law, or *adat*, was established and implemented in the *Omo Hada*, and this is also where the village council met. Although architectural styles and settlement patterns vary from the north and south ends of the island, as well as from village to village, *Omo Hada* are generally seen as the heart of a community. They are not mere dwellings, but the source of great pride and cultural identity. But despite the high value Nias people

place on their traditional architecture, *Omo Hada* have been on the wane as modern concrete houses have become increasingly popular.

When I first visited Nias in 2002, I was taken to several villages to see different styles of *Omo Hada*. On my tour, I learned that the reasons why fewer traditional style houses are being built are largely economic. I was told that it is difficult for families to adequately maintain the old houses in the traditional style, due to the high cost and unavailability of building materials such as hardwoods and thatched roofing. Ritual obligations add to the cost of constructing a house, as well. In addition to sponsoring a feast upon its completion, the owner of the house is also required to slaughter several pigs at each stage of its construction. Over and above economic concerns is the fact that few craftsmen can still be found who possess the knowledge and skills to build traditional style houses. Recent events, however, may be reversing the decline of *Omo Hada*. Ironically, the earthquake that wrought so much devastation has also brought renewed interest in a building technique that has historically proven resilient to the island's regular seismic shocks.

In a study conducted by the Vienna based Institute for Comparative Research in Architecture (ICRA), the authors noted that while some 80% of concrete, modern style houses were destroyed in the 2005 earthquake, comparatively few vernacular houses were damaged. This is because, according to ICRA researchers, Nias traditional architecture is an outstanding example of a building style (or appropriate technology) highly adapted to specific environmental conditions. These houses are usually located inland and away from coastal areas, and use locally available materials like wood and vegetal fibers. Construction techniques have been developed over the centuries to withstand the steady threat of seismic shocks, and a typical house is elevated above the ground and supported by thick, criss-crossed stilts that give when the earth moves. Architects from ICRA hope that the lessons learned from the earthquake will be used to rebuild Nias but, first, more 'research of the indigenous building types has to be carried out in order to apply the findings to the design of new forms, constructions and typologies' (Gruber and Herbig 2006, 1).

Since the earthquake, Museum Pusaka Nias staff has been working with individual families to help repair and restore their traditional style houses. On the north end of the island in the Gomo area, the museum has helped rebuild two houses and is currently supporting the reconstruction of three Laraga-style houses. Staff members are also using the project as an opportunity to expand their educational work. In one village, Sifaoro' asi Gomo, staff convinced government and school officials to make one house into a school/cultural center/museum, where school children can learn about Nias culture and history (Hämmerle 2006). To some, this may seem like a new function of *Omo Hada*, but to others, it is simply a continuation of an old tradition. *Omo Hada* have long served as a repository for a community's history and culture, as well as space in which such knowledge is transmitted. In this respect, *Omo Hada* can be viewed as an indigenous model of a museum that shows evidence, especially in customs and rituals connected to the house, of museological behavior.

Father Hämmerle, in a conference paper on Nias society, culture and the importance of traditional houses, describes the tradition of *osali*, which is a Nias word with multiple meanings. In one sense, he writes, *osali* refers to a throne or seat from which a village counselor can 'raise his voice'. But it also denotes the place in the village where these seats are erected. *Osali* also stands for a great wooden chest

where the village's valuables and precious goods are stored. The *osali* is kept in the chief's house in front of a wall on which figures of the ancestors hang, constantly reminding the household of the ancestors' spiritual presence and powers. Hämmerle maintains that there are strong beliefs associated with houses and their contents to which some villagers still adhere. For example, he states that in some areas such as the north end of the island, he has not been able to buy or acquire old houses or artifacts found in them. Their owners refuse to part with these heirlooms for fear of retribution from their ancestors (Hämmerle 2006).

Museologically speaking, such customs and beliefs have worked to protect and preserve houses and their contents for generations and, taken as a whole, *Omo Hada* and the tradition of *osali* can be seen as a Nias approach to cultural heritage preservation in both tangible and intangible forms. It is important to bear in mind, however, that not all traditions associated with the *Omo Hada* and *osali* are considered worthy of preservation. Father Hämmerle, for one, adamantly discourages the perpetuation of any tradition that promotes social inequality or creates economic hardships for the people. While he is a strong proponent of restoring and building traditional style houses, he discourages 'wasting money for pigs and expensive feasts'.

Here we are reminded that any approach to cultural heritage preservation inherently involves choices. People have always had to make choices about what from the past should be preserved for the future. At issue is the question of who decides what gets preserved, why, and how. Perhaps, just as ICRA is advocating more research on indigenous building styles, more research on Nias indigenous museology can be done to develop museological 'forms, constructions and typologies' that draw from the past, but are suited to contemporary values, needs, and purposes. Such research might lead to further advances in Nias appropriate museology.

### **Appropriate museology as humanitarian cultural work**

Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz in the Introduction to the book, *Museum frictions: Public cultures/global transformations* (2006), suggest that museums have become:

essential forms through which to make statements about history, identity, value and place and to claim recognition. Reproduced, adapted, and transformed globally, museums are not just a place or institution but have become a portable *social technology* (emphasis added), or *set of museological processes* (emphasis added) through which such statements and claims are represented, embodied, and debated. Whether they define their scope as national, regional, or community-based, museum spaces can become global theaters of real consequence. (Karp and Kratz 2006, 4)

Museum Pusaka Nias, from its inception, has been a space in which a wide range of museological processes and agents have converged from local, national, and international sources. But, in the aftermath of the tsunami and earthquake, it has clearly become a 'global theater of real consequence'. Currently, there are some 100 international foreign and domestic aid workers and organizations operating in Nias, many of which are working through the museum. This influx of people and money is not only benefiting the museum, but also the island in general, bringing an economic boom that is accelerating development and modernization. In this light, Father Hämmerle perceives the 2005 earthquake as a 'blessing in disguise' that 'marks the

beginning of a new modern time for Nias' (2006, 12) In addition to new roads, buildings, and humanitarian aid, the earthquake has brought modern technologies and services with which come modern worldviews and values. Father Hämmerle sees these changes as a positive influence on Nias society, especially for the youth who are being exposed to new ideas, behaviors, and opportunities. Nevertheless, he also worries about what will happen on the island in 2009 when the aid workers leave and the money dries up. Will the people of Nias be able to sustain the momentum of social and economic development created in the earthquake's aftermath, or will they have become too reliant on outside aid? What impact will so much change have on the people's way of life, or in other words, culture?

In September 2006, Nata'alui Duha participated in the international conference 'Culture is a basic need: Responding to cultural emergencies' in The Netherlands. The conference was sponsored by the Cultural Emergency Response (CER) network of the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, based in The Hague. The CER offers emergency relief ('first aid') for cultural heritages that have been damaged or destroyed as a result of natural or human-made disasters, as well as climate change. Its aim is to focus world attention on the value of cultural heritage and the gravity of cultural emergencies, and to promote the belief that culture is an essential element of humanitarian assistance.

The conference's purpose was to draw attention to the importance of culture in humanitarian relief, and address the impact of disasters on culture and identity. Discussions centered on why culture must be seen as a basic human need and part of humanitarian assistance. To many, it is not enough to just focus on saving lives. It is also imperative to think about how lives become meaningful again in the aftermath of a disaster. Because culture gives meaning to people's lives and is critical to their psychological well-being, it is also necessary to understand culture in the broadest sense, beyond its tangible manifestations. As Jan Pronk (2006) declared in his opening address, 'Culture is more than matter. Culture is the spirit, soul, and mind of a community. Destruction of that culture is an attack on life itself.' Georg Frerks (2006), Head of Disaster Studies at Wageningen University, also emphasized that 'culture is more than tangible materials. It also encompasses the identity and human dignity of the people in a disaster area. Good, effective aid requires that the workers understand the culture, the standards and values, all the ways of the victim's society'.

Appropriate museology is an approach to museum training and cultural heritage preservation grounded in the principle that 'culture is a basic need', and any museological practice is a profoundly cultural matter that cannot be divorced from a specific cultural context. Good and effective training requires an understanding of that context so that museological methods and technologies can be suited to it. Appropriate museology is a humanist approach that makes people and their *actual* cultural needs and circumstances the central reference point from which all work proceeds.

## Conclusion

The Museum Pusaka Nias' assistance in restoring traditional houses is an example of appropriate museology in action, and demonstrates how museums and cultural work can contribute to humanitarian relief efforts. This project is but one of the many contributions that the museum makes to its community, and how it helps meet



people's 'basic human needs'. But even though the museum is clearly a valuable resource on the island, its continued vitality and long-term survival are tenuous.

In September 2007, I heard from Father Hämmerle that the museum is no longer receiving outside aid for restoring traditional houses or for rebuilding the museum. It now relies solely on its internal budget to cover basic operating costs. It does receive funding from the district government, but this is only enough to pay workers' salaries. Consequently, the museum's ability to continue to rebuild, much less expand its activities, are limited. In his words, 'a lot of people have come to consult and praise our work, but nothing else'. Although the museum's situation may be more serious now than in the past, financial challenges are not new for the museum. As noted earlier, since its inception the museum has depended heavily on outside assistance, and its capacity to sustain itself without external support has been questionable. This brings us back to the crucial issue of local interest in, and support for, the museum.

According to Nata'alui Duha, the museum has yet to become what he and others have envisioned. He says that many people come to the museum, but primarily for recreational purposes. While this is part of the museum's mission, he does not want it simply to be a tourist destination or place where visitors come to picnic. Rather, his dream is for the museum to be a 'center of education and cultural inspiration' for the local people: 'My concern is how to move and influence the mind and behavior of visitors.' Looking into the future, he also worries about what will happen to the museum when Father Hämmerle is no longer with them. In his view, the museum's 'lack of human resources' is its biggest weakness (personal communication, September 2007).

Visitors are a museum's greatest 'human resource': without visitors, museums have no reason to exist other than to be a storehouse for objects. Museum Pusaka Nias does not necessarily need more visitors. As Nata'alui Duha says, many people come to the museum. What it needs is the active participation of local community members who are genuinely invested in the museum and value what it has to offer. The museum formed a support group, *Masyarakat Peduli Museum*, in 2004, but so far it has not been active because, in the words of Father Hämmerle, 'people do not yet understand it' (personal communication, September 2007).

The Museum Pusaka Nias has made progress since 2003, despite the enormous obstacles it has faced. For example, it now receives financial support from the local government which it did not enjoy in the past. This support is, in essence, recognition of the museum's work and the valuable contributions it makes to Nias' socio-economic development. The museum also now has an impressive website that literally connects it to the entire world. But perhaps this is the time for the museum to focus inward and strengthen its local base of support, because this is what is more likely to ensure its ultimate survival.

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